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Race, Anti-Caste and the Victorians

by Richard Huzzey

Review article to be published in *History Workshop Journal* (forthcoming, 2017)

Caroline Bressey, *Empire, Race and the Politics of Anti-Caste*, Bloomsbury, 2013, xi+287pp, ISBN 978-1-78093-633-5

Benjamin Disraeli famously declared ‘all is race’, but historians of Victorian Britain find it puzzling to decide what exactly ‘race’ was, even as they establish its importance. Just a few years after Disraeli voiced this rule in *Tancred* (1847), the Scottish ethnologist Robert Knox similarly asserted that ‘race is everything’ in his *Races of Man* (1850), his ‘philosophical enquiry into the influence of race over the destinies of nations’.¹ An anatomy lecturer and leading member of the Ethnological Society of London, Knox made a contribution to Victorian racial thinking that historians have overstated, while the romantic, historical perspective of politicians and authors such as Disraeli has probably been underplayed.² Race could easily indicate ‘social as opposed to colour distinctions’, reflected in ‘the nineteenth-century tendency to elide social, moral and physical distinctions into a single racial hierarchy’, as Kenan Malik puts it.³

Pseudo-scientific theorists such as Knox, who denied the monogenesis of common ancestors for all races, offered poisonous well-springs of racist ideas. However, most Victorians did not need science to confirm their prejudices about people with a different tongue, hue, and history. Whatever the similarities of their statements, Disraeli and Knox offered individual interpretations of a capacious, flexible term, explored in a range of recent works. Colin Kidd has shown the centrality of theological debate and biblical exegesis to the uncertain development of race as a biological category.⁴ Sadiya Qureshi has brilliantly investigated exhibitions of displayed peoples as a prism to understand the abundant proliferation of theories of human variation, arguing that ‘the often twinned notions of diachronic human variation and developmental civilization (stadial or otherwise) remained both powerful and relevant to discussion of human history and national difference’.⁵ Catherine Hall finds something similar in the racism of Charles Kingsley, when she examines his writing as one of the cultural legacies of British slave-owning families’ wealth. The novelist, she shows, ‘drew on stadial theory and by the late 1860s it was in its post-Darwinian moment, a harsher evolutionary version that saw the timing of the civilising process as glacial’.⁶ Such research elaborates on the crucial role assigned to culture in shaping “scientific” inquiry, as Douglas Lorimer argued in his path-breaking work.⁷

In light of recent scholarship on the complexities of race in Victorian Britain, this review article considers how ideas of race shaped mainstream thinking on politics, culture, and empire. The more researchers chart the amorphous nature of ‘race’, the more it seems to be everywhere precisely because it could mean anything. In fact, an examination of heroic anti-racist campaigners, who – like their twenty-first century heirs – reject ‘race’ as a social construction, might offer the chance to understand why they were so few in number. Caroline Bressey’s excellent new book, *Empire, Race and the Politics of Anti-Caste*, charts the efforts of a small circle of anti-racist activists centred around the editor Catherine Impey. She founded the journal *Anti-Caste* in 1888, intending to

encourage 'the emancipation of all men everywhere from the disabilities imposed on the ground of colour or race' (p. 31).

Street, in Somerset, was the headquarters for her radical international protest movement, which will come as a surprise to anyone who has visited the present-day town. By examining 'a microhistory of a woman's life' alongside 'an examination of unknowable readers and intersecting international networks', Bressey shows that a few Victorians could escape the confines of their society's prejudices (p. 25). This history of *Anti-Caste* should encourage us to consider why so few Britons, even in humanitarian circles, shared this dissatisfaction, and why the circulation of such an organ never expanded beyond 3,500 copies -- just ten per cent by subscription rather than distributed for free (p. 70).

In one of many transatlantic missives, Impey told Frederick Douglass that she aimed 'to take up the work where the Anti-Slavery Society had dropped it' (p. 27). As she noted, humanitarian campaigns against the Atlantic slave trade and New World slavery did not challenge racial hierarchies so much as criticise the corruption stemming from white abuse of "lower races" which held both back from civilizational progress. While Victorians might look back with pride at West Indian emancipation, even the most liberal abolitionists imagined black labour and white rule as the natural order of a free society. Even Victorian abolitionists in the Aborigines' Protection Society and the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, with whom Impey collaborated for events such as a reception for black Methodist priests (p. 37), advocated paternal protection of "weaker" races by the "stronger" ones.⁸ Indeed, the Ethnological Society had been founded in 1843 as a splinter from the Aborigines' Protection Society.⁹

To understand race and humanitarianism when Impey was growing up, we might consult a 1866 paper on England's duties to 'her subject-races', which Charles Savile Roundell penned to criticise the bloody suppression of the recent Morant Bay rebellion by emancipated Jamaicans. Having serving as secretary to the Royal Commission investigating Governor Edward Eyre's response, Roundell explained that imperial duty was founded upon European superiority to four groups of lesser peoples: 'perishing races, such as the Aborigines of Australia, or the Indians of North America; stationary or slowly progressive races, such as the Hottentots, or Negroes of the West Indies; progressive but uncivilized races, such as the Maoris and Kafirs; and lastly, the ancient but backward civilizations of China and Hindostan.' Condemning the 'dark page in history which records the contacts of Europeans with Aborigines', Roundell satirised the view that 'in the order of Providence, savage man is destined to disappear before civilized man'. Rather, he chided fellow Britons that 'it is not for us to usurp the functions of Providence, and arrogate for our own rash assumptions the sanction of an inscrutable decree.'¹⁰

Catherine Impey, just 18 at this time, broke away from the racial confines of a liberal thinker such as Roundell, by wholly rejecting 'racial uplift' as the object of humanitarianism in favour of *Anti-Caste's* rejection of all hierarchies -- and, indeed, 'race' itself. By proposing racial equality and hence a free competition of 'individual merit and fitness', Impey abandoned her interest in redistributive justice in the 1860s, focusing on the cultural prejudice which clouded advancement on the basis of 'ACTUAL PERSONAL CHARACTER' (p. 55-57). Ironically, those humanitarians such as Roundell, who emphasised 'racial uplift', showed more interest in material inopportunities than Impey, since her individualism focused on prejudice more than circumstance to explain white supremacy. Still, her

innovative achievements lay in attacking the concept of 'race' rather than the details, dimensions or consequence of its reality: in contrast to other humanitarians, her choice of the term 'anti-caste' was designed to refute all notions of race, confining them to social myth rather than moral obligation (p. 55).¹¹

In her methods, if not in her radical break from racial thinking, Impey did follow the practices of abolitionist women and earlier Victorian critics of empire. She saw tours of Britain by the African-American activist Ida B. Wells and the black Dominican Celestine Edwards as ways to build popular support beyond a circle of committed subscribers, just as visiting abolitionists and former slaves had done before the American Civil War. Moreover, like abolitionist editors, she relied on reprinting reports and news from overseas collaborators, making *Anti-Caste* a clearing house for stories of abuse and inspiration across national borders. As much as abolitionists ever did, she brought together supporters of various allied causes, including feminist Josephine Butler and Dadabhai Naoroji, who would later become Britain's first Indian MP. Impey's own Quaker family shared a circle of overlapping reform movements and it was her 1878 trip to America on behalf of the Temperance Society which first introduced her to the systematised racial prejudice of the United States.

Unfortunately, Impey's movement also imitated the sororocidal tendencies of fellow reformers. She had challenged racial barriers through her work in her Templar's Grand Lodge, leaving that movement when British activists failed to share her challenge to American segregation (pp. 42-3). *Anti-Caste* was, thus, born in the exclusion of anti-racism from temperance. It died in a far more personal dispute, when the Scottish campaigner Isabella Mayo denounced her ally Impey for expressing romantic affection to Mayo's black lodger in a private letter (p. 186). However, the modesty of the movement's successes lay as much in the breadth and narrowness of Impey's ambitions as the hurtful rift with one of her principal allies.

Given the breadth of imagination required to dismiss "race" as any kind of cultural, historical, or biological category, she always faced an uphill struggle; she makes such a fascinating case study precisely because she is so far outside radical, as much as establishment, currents of opinion. As Bressey notes, Impey recognised gender as a social construct, just like race, but failed to build tangible bridges with the women's rights movement of this period (p. 181) as she focused intently on racism. Indeed, Impey's geographical range of interest also served to narrow her focus from the possibilities of "caste" analysis. The international outlook of the magazine, particularly reflected in strong transatlantic attention to African-American lynchings and early civil rights campaigns, distanced Impey's target from racism in the British Empire. The institutional racism of the American republic could be traced more easily than the presumption of white superiority or the political sovereignty of colonialism. As well as distracting British readers with American evils, this international (if selective) focus may have pulled Impey from political activism to literary sympathy. When her 'geographical imagination' did fall in Britain's own colonies, as it did with her study of the working conditions of Assam tea-growers, Impey did not offer any practical political programme through elections, lobbying, or consumer boycotts (p. 161-2).

Ultimately, the amorphousness of *Anti-Caste's* target perhaps explains its marginal status. New and old theories of race proliferated in Impey's lifetime. From the 1870s, British anthropologists took a renewed interest in cultural or social varieties in humanity. Historical or civilizational approaches, 'older ways of framing human variety', enjoyed a long twilight in popular and intellectual circles.¹²

When Roundell offered four types of uncivilized peoples (in distinction to Europeans), he expressed his own particular variety of 'social evolution' popular in the second half of the nineteenth century; he and others could retain a historical perspective and affirm the potential unity of humankind even if, as Peter Mandler notes, 'the rungs on the ladder [of civilization] were much further apart' than they had been under older schemas of climate and creed.¹³

Indeed, in the 1890s Celestine Edwards observed that 'many are somewhat disappointed that the Negro, from whom they expected so much fifty of sixty years ago, has not come up to their expectations'. Thinking of the post-emancipation turn against people of African descent, he noted that 'it is all very well to tell people what they ought to do, but it is quite another thing to give them the opportunity of doing it' (p. 84). It would be a mistake to link this impatience, diagnosed by (probably) Britain's first black newspaper editor, to new forms of scientific racism which were qualitatively different from older prejudice. When Edwards could attack the application of natural selection to human races, he attacked just one, novel strand of racial thinking, rather than the key to all racist hierarchies.

Until the very end of the nineteenth century, few Britons followed Francis Galton's eugenicist logic of individual heredity over culture and environment.¹⁴ For many theorists, such as Hebert Spencer, natural selection was an analogy rather than an explanation for social change, and those linking biological selection to race constituted 'a subspecies' of the broader social evolutionist tradition, which could see civilizational progress in history rather than racial difference.¹⁵ Alongside work by Gregory Claeys on critics of empire, Bressey's research illuminates the strength of ideas by examining opponents to them.¹⁶ Racial pessimism was proliferating in late Victorian Britain, but it mutated in a host of different environments and directions, through alchemies of history, pre-history, and civilization as much as biology. Throughout the nineteenth century, then, "improvement" was expected at a slower pace, not so often within lifetimes. At the end of the nineteenth century, the pan-Germanist author Houston Stewart Chamberlain still blended racial heredity with culture and civilization as long-term determinants of individuals.¹⁷

Caroline Bressey's research on Catherine Impey fulfils all the requirements of good microhistory. By following the enterprise of one late Victorian woman, readers will confront the macrocosm of racial thought she opposed. As other work has suggested, the power of race to explain cross-generation hierarchies of skin colour still retained the marks of culture, climate, creed and commerce which had influenced earlier thinkers. Race was "everything" in Victorian Britain because it accommodated "all" possible arguments for individual difference, in nature or nurture. *Anti-Caste* never generated the international movement or intellectual revolution that Catherine Impey imagined, but her efforts to compare discrimination across continents and polities certainly help us to understand the thing she was up against.

¹ Patrick Brantlinger, 'Race and the Victorian Novel' in Deidre David (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, Cambridge, 2000, pp. 129-30.

² Peter Mandler, *The English National Character: The History of an Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair*, New Haven, 2006, pp. 72-80.

³ Kenan Malik, *The Meaning of Race: Race, History and Culture in Western Society*, New York, 1996, p. 95. See also Ivan Hannaford, *Race: The History of an Idea in the West*, Washington, DC, 1996, pp. 278-87.

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- ⁴ Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Atlantic World, 1600-2000*, Cambridge, 2006.
- ⁵ Sadiah Qureshi, *Peoples on Parade: Exhibitions, Empire, and Anthropology in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Chicago, 2013, pp. 198-205, quotation at p. 189.
- ⁶ Catherine Hall, 'Reconfiguring race: the stories slave-owners told' in Catherine Hall, Nicholas Draper, Keith McClelland, Katie Donington, and Rachel Lang (eds), *Legacies of British Slave-ownership: Colonial Slavery and the Formation of Victorian Britain*, Cambridge, 2014, p. 186.
- ⁷ Douglas Lorimer, *Colour, Class, and the Victorians: English Attitudes to the Negro in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, Leicester, 1978.
- ⁸ Richard Huzzey, *Freedom Burning: Anti-Slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain*, Ithaca and London, 2012, pp. 15, 198-202, 208-10; Zoë Laidlaw, 'Imperial complicity: Indigenous disposition in British history and history writing' in Catherine Hall, Nicholas Draper and Keith McClelland (eds), *Emancipation and the remaking of the British imperial world*, Manchester, 2014.
- ⁹ Qureshi, p. 212; see also Alan Lester and Fae Dussart, *Colonization and the Origins of Humanitarian Governance: Protecting Aborigines across the Nineteenth-Century British Empire*, Cambridge, 2014, pp. 258-69.
- ¹⁰ Charles Savile Roundell, *England and her Subject-Races, with Special Reference to Jamaica*, London, 1866, pp. 5-6.
- ¹¹ See Charles Hirschman, 'The origins and demise of the concept of race', *Population and Development Review* 30:3, September 2004, pp. 285-415.
- ¹² Qureshi, *Peoples on Parade*, pp. 264, 269, 274-80, quotation at p. 274.
- ¹³ Mandler, *English National Character*, p. 77.
- ¹⁴ Nicholas Wright Gillham, *A Life of Sir Francis Galton: From African Exploration to the Birth of Eugenics*, Oxford, 2001, pp. 168-72, 324-5; M.G. Bulmer, *Francis Galton: Pioneer of Heredity and Biometry*, Baltimore, 2003, pp. 79-82; Mandler, *English National Character*, p. 131.
- ¹⁵ J.W. Burrow, *Evolution and Society: A Study in Victorian Social Theory*, Cambridge, 1966, pp. 20-23, 130-36, quotation at p. 115; Mark Francis, *Herbert Spencer and the Invention of Modern Life*, Ithaca, 2007, pp. 294-211.
- ¹⁶ Gregory Claeys, *Imperial Sceptics: British Critics of Empire, 1850-1920*, Cambridge, 2010.
- ¹⁷ Hannaford, *Race*, pp. 348-53.